

LITTLE LESSONS IN CHURCH WORK

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V. The Use of Discipline in the Church

The sixth definition of "discipline" in the Standard dictionary is "censure, expulsion, or deprivation of privileges by a church or other organization in punishment of offenses." Like all definitions, it was made to fit the customs of the people who use the term. I have no fault to find with it, even from a Bible standpoint. I am concerned about *discipline* just so far as the Bible is concerned, no farther. What other works have to say about *discipline* are useful only as they throw light on what this one Book says. This Book covers the matter of offenses from the man who "remembers that his brother has sinned against him" to the man who is involved in the blackest crime. The first sermon the Master ever preached, *discipline* was made a very prominent feature. Paul, in his two letters to the Corinthian brethren, deals with few other subjects save those of a disciplinary character. His two letters to Timothy are veritable training schools to all who would like an education in church administration.

The power and influence of any constitution whether it be written by the Son of God, or by fallible men, depends altogether on what use is made of it. The wisest things in God's word may be, and often are, wrestled from their holy place and made to subserve the basest uses of men. If the efficiency of N. T. church government is to be measured by its administration, it will often be found wanting. He who makes up his estimate of a man by seeing a few mistakes is no more short sighted than he who condemns N. T. church government because of some bungling administrator. A diamond in the hands of unskilled workmen may never sparkle; but you would not condemn the diamond. God's gems of truth, if not skillfully set in deeds of love, may never shine; but don't belittle the gems. Back of any successful church-government must be large hearts of love; hearts of love are not made by human rules, but by the Holy Spirit.

If opposing elements are to be brought together each must love—love right more than victory. Victory for wrong is a triumph of the devil.

I take the word "church" in my subject to mean congregation. Having no account in the New Testament of any federation of congregations, discipline could only pertain to a congregation. The "use of discipline" in the congregation is the same as its use in any body—to render it more efficient in accomplishing its work. In I Cor. 12, in enumerating the different agencies which God has set in the church, we have that of *governments* mentioned. As long as men are imperfect there will be need of "wise counsels" as the margin puts it. Discipline makes the assembly more efficient by securing (1) symmetry. In all of God's products of creation, *symmetry* is the one predominant characteristic. When God made a world he

did not make it prismatic in form, it has enough sharp corners by being round. When he made man, he did not make him all eyes, or all hands, or all feet. Tho I have known some that bordered closely upon freaks in that they seemed to be nearly all mouth. But, my brother, how would you be impressed by a body called a church having for its elders men who absolutely did nothing but quarrel with every one with whom they could; having for a treasurer a man who couldn't count pennies; having for a choir people who could do nothing but write notes; having for Sunday school teachers, those who could neither teach nor learn; having for a pastor a man who would talk nothing else but politics. Would such a body inspire you to start out immediately to organize other similar bodies?

Paul says, "but God tempered the body together." But woe be it when you get the wood for the bit and the steel for the handle. No, in order that a body may be strong, influential, and efficient, God must be permitted to set the members as it has pleased him, and only those will be doing the kind of work for which they have been called.

(2) Discipline will make the body *respectable*. The chief barrier in the way of the rapid progress of our congregations has been the lack of gospel discipline. Because of this our congregations have lost their respectability in many places. Church work has been done in the loosest manner imaginable. I have wondered sometimes how persons could have hit upon such a bad way of doing some things. Our enemies have not failed to make the most of these blunders. They have pointed out the fact, and with crushing effect, that our people are without system in the management of their congregations. The lies put in circulation by Christian professors for the soul purpose of injuring us, have done some hurt, but that which has done us most harm has been the naked truth. And strange to say the persons who have been schooled from ten to forty years in the most iron-clad systems of church government on the continent, have upon coming to us, proven to be the most miserable excuses as disciplinarians. I can not argue, therefore, that it has been a lack of training for those who had the least training in human systems have been the most successful.

Another use of discipline is to save the congregation. The Corinthian church, with its divisions and heresies and desecrations, was saved by following the advice of Paul. His entire letter shows us the spirit and nature of all true church discipline. One can readily see from his teaching that right methods applied in the wrong spirit will always fail. So will wrong methods applied in the right spirit fail. To what did Paul appeal in his work with this disordered church? It was invariably their *sense of right*. Policies and expedencies may do in some kinds of church work, but in disciplinary matters *what is right* is the only foundation outside of sandy ones upon which we

dare build if the work is to stand. Paul pointed out their evils, held before them the right, and exhorted them to rally around it. Many men would have determined what a majority wanted and then he would have taken his stand there, regardless of what was right in the case. In the case of incest, chapter 5, his appeal was not so much to his authority as to what was right. When he comes to deal with their corruptions of the Lord's Supper, whatever authority he had was hidden in his splendid appeal to right, and his admonition to adhere to it.

Another use of discipline is to *save the individual*. Now it is done mostly with the idea of destroying him. He who loses sight of the salvation of the erring in administering discipline will make the mistake of his life. Read I Cor. 5. Here the end aimed at was "that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." You can't save rogues and rascals by keeping them in the church, neither can you save them by dealing with them in the wrong spirit. A man can easily tell whether he is dealt with in a Christian spirit or whether action has been taken to humiliate him, and if the latter, its the first step to his ruin, by people who should have been his light and example. Matt. 18 looks to the same thing. The offended party is here commanded to make the first advance in the way of reconciliation. The offended party needs saving and the best way in all the world to accomplish it is to take a step in the right direction. Having shown a disposition to get right, other steps can be taken with safety, as indicated.

Brethren, the good old gospel is not a dead letter. It is yet able to make us wise unto salvation. The wisdom of men is foolishness in the sight of God, and if we don't want to be an example of the fact we had better follow the wisdom of God.

DUTIES OF THE UNCONVERTED

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Duty is that which is due, or which a person is bound by obligation to do. In short, nothing but obedience or an act of reverence. The unconverted or those who are not regenerated, not changed in opinion, not renewed in mind, but are according to the unrefined nature which always produces fruits of rebellion in the sight of the great Creator of all things. Now the duties of the unregenerated, both old and young, are to repent of their actual transgressions, conform to divine law, and so meet the approbation of God which produces that peace of mind which the world can not give or understand, or can we obtain short of repentance from sin for God offers nothing of grace outside of repentance. My unconverted friend, who ever you are, repent of all your transgressions, draw near unto God for he is merciful. Submit yourselves therefore to God: resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hand, ye sinner, and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflict-